

## **RACCOON HOUND HUNTERS FOCUS GROUP MEETING SUMMARY DECEMBER 4, 2007; RICHMOND, VIRGINIA**

### **GROUP PROFILE**

The Raccoon Hound Hunter focus group took place on December 4, 2007, in Richmond, VA, as part of a statewide effort to identify and evaluate issues of concern related to hound hunting in the state. Approximately twelve people were invited to attend this focus group meeting. Invitees were selected because they had previously contacted the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) and expressed an interest in participating, because they had some involvement in hound hunting issues in the past, or because they were leaders in the hound hunting community; invitees resided primarily in western and central Virginia. The focus group meeting was attended by nine hunters; eight were white males; one was a black male. All of the individuals present were avid raccoon hound hunters; some also hunt deer, turkey, rabbit, and fox with dogs. One participant also identified himself as a non-hound hunter, who previously hunted with hounds, but had to give it up due to advanced age.

Most participants were members of local or regional hunt clubs, sportsmen's groups, kennel clubs, or houndsmen's groups; several of those hold or have held leadership positions in the organizations they belong to.

### **FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY**

The focus group was conducted for approximately two hours. During that time, participants responded to a series of questions posed by the facilitator (in bold, below). A summary of responses is provided below, including direct quotes from meeting participants that help to illustrate any common themes or key points from the discussion.

#### **How important is hound hunting for you compared to other types of hunting or recreation that you and your family take part in?**

Participants were passionate about raccoon hound hunting. Many were lifelong participants in the activity. All participants indicated that the use of hounds in raccoon hunting was an integral part of the sport. Participants described how raccoon hounds are specially trained for the activity and emphasized the significance of competition raccoon hunting. Participants indicated that they develop strong bonds with their hounds.

*"Well, it's been a very important part of my life for the last fifty-five years. I started following an old man in West Virginia when I was about twelve years old through the mountains and did it regularly until about five years ago....I hope it sticks around for a long time."*

*"With 'coon hunting, without the hound, there is no coon hunting."*

*“Coon hunting is a little bit different from the other hound hunting sports. I think we all agree the hound is really the coon hunt... You got to do a lot of training with a coon hound, one on one, in the woods... With ‘coon hunting, which all of us are competition hunters, we have to know each individual dog when we go into a competition hunt. There are three to four dogs in a cast and each person who owns that dog has to know their dog when it opens on the trail, know their dog when it trees, and you’ve got to call that dog if it trees and its scored according to how you call it. So you’ve got to know the hound. It’s a true hound sport.”*

*“You take a ‘coon hound out, you spend a lot of time with the dog. You usually have one dog, you’re working, you see how he’s going to be and he’s almost like your little hunting buddy.”*

### **What are the two or three most important aspects of hunting with hounds to you?**

Participants indicated that the most important aspects of raccoon hound hunting included working with the hounds and relaxing in the quiet of the night. Participants also indicated that raccoon hunting is important for teaching important values to young people.

*“Working with the dogs. I like taking a puppy that I raised and getting him started and finishing that dog. And knowing I’ve accomplished that, been working with that dog. He’s got as much confidence for us as we do in him. It’s all about the dogs.”*

*“It’s mostly relaxing. You can have the most stress on you in the world, like you’re about to blow up, and you can go turn a ‘coon dog loose and you can just forget about everything. Just listen to them run the track and tree. It’s like the most peaceful thing you can do. There’s nothing like being in the woods at nighttime.”*

*“The kids grow up into it. It’s a different type of respect they learn by helping with the dogs. It gives them a sense of responsibility.... These kids today need some of that.”*

*“It’s not just hunting with dogs. [Kids get] responsibility. You’ve got to clean the dogs, you’ve got to help feed the dogs, you’ve got to help take care of the dogs. That’s all part of it. It’s like a heritage type issue. It’s not all concrete buildings, it’s still country life.”*

### **What do you believe to be the most important issues facing hunters who use hounds today?**

Participants indicated that reduced access to land for hunting is likely the most important issue facing hound hunters today. Participants described blocked access to property they once had an opportunity to hunt on, increased time and effort needed to build relationships with landowners, and how new residents don’t know or understand hunting. Participants also described landowners being unaware of existing laws, specifically the right-to-retrieve law. Participants further stressed the need for the right-to-retrieve law, specifically related to raccoon hunting, where dogs are trained to stay at the tree.

*“Well, city folk goes out there and buys five acres and he thinks he owns the whole...county. That’s a big problem today and it’s going to get worse. In another fifteen, twenty years, a man can shoot his ‘coon dogs and quit because there’s going to be nowhere for you to hunt.”*

*“When I was a kid, I could leave my house and I could hunt for as long as I wanted to walk and come back and I was on property that I knew who owned every inch....It’s come to a time when you need to keep up with your adjacent property owners more to touch base with them, let them know what’s going on.”*

*“These people move out of the city where there’s been a lot of violence, and they get out here and they’ve still got these city values and they just don’t understand how things work in the country. They just don’t understand. They don’t have any idea of what it takes to hunt any kind of animal.”*

*“One of our biggest problems is all these big tracts of land they’re selling these little two acre lots all the way around so, no matter where you go in there, when you come out, you’re going to go through somebody’s yard.”*

*“Right-to-retrieve is a law. And the people raising Cain about you going to retrieve your dog, that’s their ignorance of the law.”*

*“That’s the thing about a ‘coon dog. You don’t wait for it to come out. My dog’s treed for three hours before I could ever get to her and she stayed put that whole time....We have to have the right-to-retrieve.”*

**Have you or your hunting partners experienced any conflicts with landowners, other hunters or anyone else in relation to your hunting with hounds? What was the nature of the conflict? Was it resolved? How?**

Although participants acknowledged that there are some problems, they felt that, for the most part, existing laws were favorable for hound hunting and they personally did not experience many conflicts. When conflicts have arisen, participants have contacted law enforcement, but responses were not satisfactory.

*“It’s just isolated incidents. The squeaky wheel gets the grease. I think the current laws are excellent and I’d like to see them remain how they are.”*

*“There are hunters who don’t abide by the law. There are land owners who do not abide by the law. I reckon any one of us has had some type of incidents if people want to talk about. It’s been years since I had one.”*

*“That night they shot at us we called the game warden and the deputy and they told us that without having an actual bullet or seeing the fire from the muzzle there was nothing we could do....They said they were shooting squirrels off the porch.”*

*“I’ve had some bad situations. People shot at me. Even had one guy call the cops on me twice.”*

**Are there certain areas where you think that hunting with hounds is inappropriate? Do you have any guidelines you follow that determine where you will release your hounds?**

Participants indicated that they would not hunt places that are unsafe for their dogs, which represent a significant investment of resources and time.

*“Most of us look at a piece of property and, if it’s unsafe for our dogs, we won’t turn ‘em loose.”*

*“I won’t turn my dog loose near a major road.”*

*“If you put Harry out somewhere that was dangerous and he got killed, what is that about a \$30,000 loss?”*

**Some hunting groups (e.g., bow hunters) have developed education and ethics programs that amount to a set of “best practices.” Do you think that is something that other hunters, including those who use hounds, should do?**

Participants indicated that raccoon hunters already have very strong ethics that are shared amongst their group and passed down to new hunters, especially young people entering the sport. Participants were somewhat concerned that unethical behavior on the part of other hound hunting groups (i.e. non-coon hound hunters) is having an effect on the way the public views raccoon hound hunters. Participants reiterated that raccoon hound hunting, especially competition hunting, is markedly different from other hound hunting pursuits.

*“It goes back to the bad apples. There’s not as many ‘coon hunters out there as there are deer hunters and maybe...I don’t want to knock on someone else’s sport. Maybe a certain group is causing problems for us. They’re not abiding by the right-to-retrieve law like us.”*

*“The ethics were kind of taught to us as little kids when we were coming along. You’re taught to respect that man’s property so you can come back and go at night.”*

*“The clubs in the state do a pretty good job of keeping up with that. Even the young kids. They want to come participate in the clubs and the club is, you know, you messing up, you got to straighten up or you’ll be gone.”*

*“It’s a thing called common sense. That’s all the ethics you need. If you use common sense, you’ll never have a problem.”*

**Are there any other important questions that this group should discuss?**

Participants asked about some of the issues that have come up in other focus group meetings. They were concerned that there were potential solutions already on the table. Facilitators assured the group that there were no solutions currently proposed.

Participants also stressed the need to maintain the right-to-retrieve for raccoon hunting, the need for additional conservation police officers, and the need for all hunters and clubs to take a more proactive stance on policing their own ranks.

Participants also described instances where dog collars have been destroyed and hunters have had little recourse, even when law enforcement was involved.

Finally, participants indicated that “pleasure” raccoon hunters might be left out because the raccoon hunters in the focus group were primarily competition hunters. Participants recommended that this group be included as the process moves forward, as they might have a unique perspective to contribute.

## SUMMARY

Raccoon hound hunters who participated in this focus group meeting were extremely passionate about their sport. Many were lifelong participants, were members of hound hunting organizations or clubs, and many held leadership positions in those groups. Most participants in this focus group meeting were competition hunters who valued the sport for the opportunity it gave them to work with their hounds and spend relaxing, quiet time in the woods at night. Participants indicated that changes in landownership and changing attitudes of landowners are the biggest concern for hound hunters in Virginia today. These changes have reduced the availability of land for hound hunting and, in some cases, made raccoon hound hunting more challenging as hunters have to increase communication and public relations efforts with landowners. Participants indicated that changing land use patterns will continue to increase their chances for negative interactions with landowners who increasingly do not understand the hunting culture into which they have moved. Participants stressed the need to maintain a right-to-retrieve law that is favorable to hound hunters, especially as it relates to competition raccoon hound hunters who use highly trained, expensive dogs.